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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 52/211 B of 19 December 1997, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months during its fifty-second session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The present report, which covers developments since the submission of the report of the Secretary-General of 14 November 1997 (A/52/682-S/1997/894), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

2. On 29 December 1997, Mr. Norbert H. Holl completed his assignment as Head of UNSMA. Mr. James C. Ngobi, Deputy Head of UNSMA, has since that time directed UNSMA activities on the ground as its Acting Head. Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi will continue to serve as my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, while also carrying out other functions for the United Nations at my request from time to time. Together with the Department of Political Affairs, he will continue to oversee and guide the activities of UNSMA, including its coordination of and cooperation in humanitarian and other United Nations activities in Afghanistan. He will also undertake diplomatic initiatives, as appropriate, aimed at bringing peace to Afghanistan. I have asked him to pay special attention to diplomatic contacts with the Governments of countries that have influence with Afghan factions and parties, in particular those with common borders with Afghanistan. Mr. Brahimi is scheduled to visit the region soon to discuss with the Afghan parties and the Governments of the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan the current situation and the prospects for the future.

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

3. As mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution 52/211 B, UNSMA continued its efforts to facilitate national reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan and explored opportunities for bringing the factions together and starting a dialogue. One example of this was the effort by UNSMA to build a political dialogue on the agreements reached by several of the factions to exchange prisoners of war. Unfortunately, this effort was frustrated when disputes arose between the Taliban and General Abdul Rashid Dostum, resulting in the de facto detention of General Dostum's negotiator. The details of the prisoner exchanges are described in section III of the present report.

4. UNSMA held a round of meetings in January and February 1998 with leaders of the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. The purpose was to test the climate for peace talks, either through the Taliban-proposed council of ulema (religious scholars) or through a separate initiative. While both sides stated their willingness to cooperate in establishing an ulema council, two Northern Alliance leaders urged the United Nations to proceed with its own initiative to convene an intra-Afghan meeting at a neutral venue. The developments concerning the ulema proposal are also described in section III.

5. UNSMA made special efforts to broaden its consultations with a wide variety of Afghan and other influential individuals and groups in Pakistan. These consultations included meetings with non-partisan Afghans advancing a number of their own peace proposals, including the organization of a loya jirgah (grand assembly). UNSMA made clear that all serious ideas were welcome to the extent that they could contribute to a peaceful settlement of the country's civil strife.

6. In December 1997 and January 1998, the Special Mission expended considerable time and effort in responding to allegations of human rights violations by the Afghan belligerents, particularly in northern Afghanistan. Since some of these alleged violations had occurred in remote areas of northern and north-western Afghanistan, this took inordinate amounts of time and logistical effort. An UNSMA officer accompanied Mr. Choong-Hyun Paik, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights for Afghanistan, during his mission from 30 November to 13 December 1997 to Afghanistan. Section IV of the present report focuses on the allegations of mass killings and measures taken thus far by the United Nations in response to them.

III. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

7. UNSMA continued to monitor closely the military and political developments in and around Afghanistan throughout the reporting period. The humanitarian situation has been monitored by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan.

A. Military situation

8. The military situation remained stalemated, with occasional flare-ups of fighting along the front lines between the Taliban and the factions belonging to the Northern Alliance. The continued fighting has not produced any significant changes in the front lines, but it has caused further destruction, deaths, injuries and internal displacement of large numbers of people. The predominantly Pushtoon Taliban continued to hold approximately two thirds of the country's territory in the south, south-west and south-east, while the mostly Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara Northern Alliance remained in control of most territories north of the Hindu Kush mountains.

9. On 15 December 1997, a three-pronged Taliban force crossed the then-existing front line near Bala Murghab in the north-western province of Badghis and penetrated into the southern part of Faryab Province, a stronghold of the Northern Alliance to the north-east of Badghis Province. Capturing the predominately Uzbek and Turkmen villages along the invasion routes, the Taliban forces occupied the district capital of Qaisar in southern Faryab for two weeks until they were repulsed at Kezel Kota pass and eventually expelled from the area by forces loyal to General Dostum.

10. Fighting continued in other areas, in particular along the front line 20 to 25 kilometres north of Kabul, where forces of the Taliban and those of Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud regularly exchanged artillery and rocket fire. On 3 and 4 February 1998, after a four-month lull in attacks on the capital, heavy barrages of rockets struck Kabul City and its airport from the north. One rocket narrowly missed a crowded housing area.

11. The two forces also clashed in December and early January in the Tagab district of Kapisa Province to the east of Kabul.

12. The north-eastern province of Kunduz remained under Taliban control, despite repeated attempts by the Northern Alliance to dislodge them. Clashes took place at Bangi, in the eastern part of Kunduz, between Massoud forces and the Taliban, and in Baghlan to the south of Kunduz between the Taliban and forces loyal to General Dostum. On 9 February, Taliban bombing raids hit Taloqan, the capital of Takhar Province to the east of Kunduz, killing 17 persons and damaging the airport.

13. Elsewhere, fighting between the Taliban and the Hezb-i-Wahdat broke out on 20 December at Qarabagh to the south-west of Kabul. The clashes followed the Taliban's blockade against United Nations food shipments from Ghazni to Bamyan and other food-deficit regions in central Afghanistan. The Taliban mounted several air raids on Bamyan in January.

B. Political situation

14. Afghanistan remained in political deadlock throughout the reporting period. Foreign military assistance continued to pour into the country, inhibiting all peacemaking efforts by fuelling the war machines of the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. Despite their rhetorical support for the United Nations and a

negotiated settlement, neither side appeared ready to abandon the military option.

15. War weariness continues to erode support for the war, particularly in rural areas. Both in the Taliban- and the Northern Alliance-controlled areas there were reports of resistance to recruitment for military duty, as well as internal friction resulting from factional rivalry.

16. General Dostum returned from exile in Turkey in September and slowly re-established himself as the leader of the Uzbek Jumbesh Party. This ultimately led General Abdul Malik to flee the country and seek refuge in the Islamic Republic of Iran in December 1997. Tension has continued, however, in Mazar-i-Sharif where the factions of the Northern Alliance partitioned the city into separate control zones. Efforts among the Northern Alliance leaders to resolve their differences have been partially successful.

17. A potential avenue for dialogue between the two sides was the initiation of mutual prisoner-of-war exchanges during November and December 1997. General Dostum started the process in late November with a unilateral release of nearly 200 prisoners from the Sherberghan jail, following his capture of the city from General Malik. Subsequently, other exchanges were initiated and effected with the assistance of UNSMA, at the request of General Dostum's Jumbesh Party, and with the cooperation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Several high-ranking Taliban prisoners, including Mullah Abdul Razzak, former Governor of Herat, were freed or allowed to escape, following General Malik's departure.

18. Unfortunately, however, the prisoner exchanges ran into trouble by the end of December 1997, with each side accusing the other of bad faith. A casualty of this unhappy situation is Mullah Abdul Baqi Turkestani, a representative of General Dostum who played a major part in the prisoner release negotiations with the Taliban only to end up as a detainee himself in Kandahar. UNSMA efforts to secure his release have not been successful so far.

19. However, a new initiative launched by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan revived hopes for a negotiated settlement. During his visit to Tehran for the eighth session of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), held from 9 to 11 December, Mr. Sharif met with Northern Alliance President Rabbani. In a well-publicized move, he subsequently invited Mr. Rabbani to visit Islamabad. On 23 December, the Jamiat-i-Islami leader arrived in Pakistan from Mazar-i-Sharif for a week-long visit. Accompanied by representatives of the other four Northern Alliance parties, Mr. Rabbani held a series of talks in Islamabad. However, the Taliban, who apparently opposed the Pakistani initiative, did not attend the meetings or accept the agreement reached between Mr. Sharif and Mr. Rabbani for an intra-Afghan dialogue among political leaders. Instead, they reiterated their own proposal to convene a council of ulema, who would be appointed by both sides. At the end of his stay in Pakistan, Mr. Rabbani announced his agreement to the Taliban-proposed ulema meeting as a first step towards more direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Mr. Rabbani also appealed for a ceasefire to be observed by all sides during the holy month of Ramadan. A Taliban spokesman rejected the offer.

20. On 6 February, the Northern Alliance submitted to the Taliban, through the Government of Pakistan, a list containing the names of 45 ulema. On 12 February, the Taliban, who were yet to produce their own list, declared that the Northern Alliance list was "unacceptable" because some of the people in the list did not qualify as ulema in the view of the Taliban and also because the Northern Alliance had failed to give "an assurance that they will accept to abide by whatever decisions are taken by the ulema meeting".

21. On the regional front, a new spirit of cooperation between Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran on Afghanistan provides a potentially more promising prospect. At the eighth session of OIC in Tehran, Prime Minister Sharif and Iranian President Mohammed Khatami agreed to work together for a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict. As evidence of such a new spirit of cooperation, the two Governments co-sponsored the OIC resolution on Afghanistan, calling for an end to foreign arms shipments to the belligerent factions, a ceasefire and an intra-Afghan dialogue. The meeting of minds of the two leaders raised hopes that Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran could engage in genuine cooperation to end the long-lasting civil war in Afghanistan. At the OIC summit, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia exchanged views on Afghanistan with both President Mohammed Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei. Crown Prince Abdullah also met Mr. Rabbani.

22. In my statement at the OIC summit on 9 December, I expressed deep concern about the prolonged civil war in Afghanistan, which had defied repeated international efforts for peace and taken a heavy toll on the Afghan people in terms of unspeakable human suffering. I stressed that any genuine peace process must begin with a complete ceasefire and the cessation of the continued arms supply to Afghanistan, which, together with the inability of Afghan leaders to rise above their narrow factional interests, had rendered diplomatic initiatives virtually irrelevant.

23. My Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, visited Saudi Arabia between 17 and 25 January 1998 for consultations with Saudi officials and the OIC secretariat, as well as with dignitaries visiting the country during the holy month of Ramadan. He met with Crown Prince Abdullah, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, and Director of Intelligence Prince Turki al-Faisal. On 24 January, the Special Envoy was received by Prime Minister Sharif of Pakistan in Mecca. The Prime Minister explained that his initiative signalled a new Pakistani policy towards Afghanistan and reaffirmed his country's support for the United Nations peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan.

24. While in Saudi Arabia, Mr. Brahimi met Mullah Mohamed Rabbani, Chairman of the Taliban supreme shura in Kabul. He also had talks with OIC Secretary-General Azzedine Laraki on the Afghan situation and discussed ways to coordinate further the efforts of OIC and the United Nations to bring about peace in Afghanistan.

25. Subsequently, I met Prime Minister Sharif on 31 January in Davos, Switzerland, where we exchanged views on Afghanistan. Mr. Sharif reconfirmed Pakistan's support for the United Nations efforts, saying that the United Nations and Pakistan had a common agenda in Afghanistan. I was encouraged by

the Prime Minister's comment that a solution to the conflict resided in a broad-based government and thus a "broad-based dialogue", involving all key actors in Afghanistan.

C. Humanitarian situation

26. The humanitarian situation deteriorated sharply in Bamyan Province, where several hundred thousand people suffered from severe food shortages owing to poor harvests caused by bad weather, a blockade of the Ghazni-Kabul trade route in the south of Bamyan and the lack of supplies coming in from the northern route owing to insecurity and looting. Despite numerous appeals by the United Nations for the blockade to be lifted, at the time of writing of the present report, it remained in place. While the World Food Programme (WFP) was able to distribute some 5,700 tons of locally purchased potatoes to 129,000 of the 160,000 neediest people, broader efforts to supply the region with wheat and other commodities in late autumn and early winter were largely unsuccessful. In December 1997, WFP negotiated an airlift of food supplies of up to 2,500 tons to Bamyan, but was forced to cancel it after delivering less than 10 per cent of the agreed quantity when Taliban authorities started dropping bombs at Bamyan airport and refused to guarantee safe passage of the United Nations chartered aircraft. Winter snow now makes this region inaccessible, and recent reports have indicated the threat of starvation in some of the more isolated areas.

27. The contamination of large areas with landmines and unexploded ordnance continued to be a major hindrance to rehabilitation and development in Afghanistan, as well as a deterrent to the return of refugees. More than 725 square kilometres of land remained contaminated, of which 324 square kilometres were considered high priority for clearance. In addition to building up its mine-awareness training activities, the Mine Action Programme of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan enhanced its mine survey capacity - notably through the increased use of mine dog sets. A potential funding crisis was averted when donors responded positively to the interim appeal launched in December 1997.

28. Between 12 and 24 November 1997, the United Nations fielded an inter-agency gender mission to Afghanistan, led by Ms. Angela King, the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. The mission examined the conditions of women in Afghanistan, looked at the contexts within which external assistance was planned and delivered, explored ways in which the international community could address gender concerns in the delivery of aid and proposed indicators which could be used to ensure the appropriate monitoring of assistance activities. The report of the mission offers guidelines for strengthening the role of women in the delivery of assistance. It focuses on two key issues that influence the provision of assistance: the current socio-economic environment and the principle-centred approach to gender that has been mandated by the United Nations, but which has often proven difficult to implement. The report discusses ways in which the principle-centred approach could be put into practice so that assistance can better serve the people of Afghanistan.

29. The second meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group was held in New York on 3 December 1997, chaired by Norway. Representatives from Australia, Canada,

Denmark, the European Commission, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America participated in the meeting, as well as representatives from United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations. The Group discussed, inter alia, the political and security situation in Afghanistan; the strategic framework and the assistance strategy for Afghanistan (see A/52/536, paras. 50 and 51); human rights, gender and related issues; and drug control. During the meeting, the Afghanistan Support Group endorsed the evolving strategy for Afghanistan, while a proposal to establish a common funding mechanism was deemed premature. The next meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group is scheduled to be held in London in May 1998.

30. On 4 February 1998, an earthquake struck Rustaq district and its surrounding villages in Takhar Province, a remote mountainous area in northern Afghanistan. The earthquake destroyed 28 villages and resulted in the death of some 4,000 persons, with a further 20,000 rendered homeless. Bad weather from heavy snowfalls and rugged terrain hampered relief supplies from reaching this isolated part of Afghanistan. Relief supplies were therefore transported to the affected area more slowly than expected by land and air from within Afghanistan and from Pakistan and Tajikistan. The first aircraft to bring relief supplies was from the Pakistani air force. ICRC supported airdrop operations, which the United Nations complemented with airlifts. Coordination between agencies, both at Islamabad and in the field, was conducted efficiently and effectively, with ICRC coordinating non-food relief, the United Nations coordinating food supplies and Médecins Sans Frontières taking responsibility for medical supply coordination. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan served as the focal point for information collation, consolidation and dissemination.

31. The 1998 consolidated appeal for Afghanistan was launched on 4 February 1998, seeking some US$ 157 million to meet assistance needs between 1 January and 31 December 1998. The appeal is a transitional one, constituting one of the first steps in implementing the assistance strategy for Afghanistan. The appeal suggests ways in which a common programme can be defined and realized, and emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the process is collaborative and transparent to all stakeholders. The appeal includes a number of longer-term projects, such as those in the fields of education and rural and urban rehabilitation, which are increasingly recognized as being fundamental to the achievement of sustainable peace.

32. The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello, visited Afghanistan from 20 to 25 February 1998. He visited Kabul, Faizabad and Kandahar and met with senior local authorities and aid workers. Mr. Vieira de Mello underlined the importance of improved security and of a unified, coherent and consistent approach by United Nations agencies in the implementation of humanitarian assistance programmes.

33. The deteriorating security conditions for United Nations personnel continued to be of serious concern to me. I was particularly disturbed to learn that Taliban aircraft bombed Bamyan airport on 31 December and 1 January, when

United Nations personnel and aircraft were on the ground. On the first occasion, WFP was initiating an airlift of emergency food supplies to Bamyan, with the cooperation of the Pakistani authorities. On the second occasion, a United Nations team was at Bamyan airport to examine the security conditions. These attacks not only prevented the delivery of urgently needed food to 160,000 people who rely on United Nations assistance, but also jeopardized the safety of humanitarian workers. In both cases, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan had obtained flight clearance from the Taliban in advance.

IV. ALLEGATIONS OF MASS KILLINGS

34. Disturbing evidence of possible mass killings surfaced during the reporting period, with accusations of mutual atrocities committed by combatants against civilian populations and prisoners of war. The seriousness of these accusations, which carry heavy moral, political and legal implications, has compelled me to draw the special attention of Member States to a future course of action the Organization should take in order to address the situations.

35. Following consolidation of his control over Jowzjan Province, General Dostum announced in mid-November that his forces had discovered a number of mass graves in northern Afghanistan. The General alleged that, while he was in exile in Turkey, Taliban prisoners had been massacred during the summer of 1997 under orders of his rival, General Malik. The allegation was denied by General Malik, who maintained, inter alia, that those buried in mass graves were soldiers who had been killed during the fighting.

36. Immediately after the news broke, I issued a statement on 18 November and expressed deep concern about the reported discovery of mass graves. I also instructed UNSMA to dispatch immediately a team to the area to obtain firsthand information. The UNSMA team, which visited Sheberghan on 19 November, was taken to the sites of mass graves by General Dostum himself. Various signs were observed, including human remains near the grave surfaces, which indicated that a large number of bodies were buried there. The team recommended that since it was unable to determine whether those buried were troops killed in action or prisoners executed, a prima facie investigation should be conducted by experts. A copy of the report was immediately forwarded to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

37. Subsequently, Mr. Paik, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights for Afghanistan, visited Afghanistan between 30 November and 13 December 1997 and travelled to the sites of the alleged massacres. A forensic expert who accompanied Mr. Paik remained in the region for a longer period and on 6 January 1998 submitted a report to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In the report, the forensic expert concluded that of the three areas he visited in northern Afghanistan for a preliminary investigation, two areas contained evidence that might support allegations of human rights abuses. He recommended that a neutral team of independent investigators re-examine those areas as soon as logistically possible.

38. Similar allegations of atrocities were made by Hazara leaders. They alleged that while retreating from the northern port of Hairaton in September 1997, Taliban troops had massacred the elders, women and children of villages near Mazar-i-Sharif. The Taliban authorities denied the allegation. During the mission, Mr. Paik also visited those villages. He recommended that an investigation be carried out to excavate, with permission, bodies in order to verify the allegations.

39. In January 1998, General Dostum alleged new atrocities by Taliban soldiers during their two-week occupation of Faryab Province in December 1997. While most residents of the affected villages fled before the Taliban advance, some of the noncombatants left behind - mainly the very old, women and small children - had reportedly fallen victim to acts of rape, murder, arson, looting, beatings and abductions. While the Taliban denied the accusations, the Northern Alliance leaders have called on the United Nations to investigate these alleged Taliban atrocities.

V. ACTIVITIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

40. I stressed in my previous report (A/52/682-S/1997/894) that in view of the unabated supply of arms and the divergence of ways in which the countries concerned seemed to be dealing with the Afghan conflict, a solid international framework must be established in order to address the external aspects of the Afghan question. It was in this context that the Special Envoy and Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, convened on 3 March the 4th meeting of the "Six plus Two". The group comprises the neighbours of Afghanistan - China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - as well as the Russian Federation and the United States.

41. At the meeting, the "Six plus Two" discussed and finalized their common talking points, which were to be used by them individually and collectively when they consulted the Afghan factions (see annex). They also had a preliminary exchange of views on effective and even-handed ways to curb the flow of arms and other war-making materials into Afghanistan, including the possibility of an embargo.

42. I am pleased to note that other than the "Six plus Two" group, a number of countries have shown keen interest in Afghanistan and expressed strong support for the United Nations efforts. Some of these other countries have expressed their intention to coordinate their diplomatic efforts with those of the "Six plus Two", including by using the same talking points in their own contacts with the Afghan factions.

VI. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

43. The tragedy of Afghanistan continues as the factions, supported by the uninterrupted supply of arms from outside, keep fighting in defiance of the will of the vast majority of the Afghan people. Foreign interference by countries in the region and beyond in the form of active political and military support of

one faction or another, reinforces the reluctance of the faction leaders to engage in serious political dialogue with one another and remains a major cause of the prolonged turmoil in Afghanistan.

44. In view of this, I remain convinced that it is imperative for the United Nations and Member States to take a hard look at the external aspects of the Afghan question and attempt to address them in earnest. This, of course, includes genuine efforts on the part of the countries concerned to find a common approach to the Afghan question and to agree on measures to curb the flow of arms and other war-making materials into Afghanistan.

45. While the focus remains on the external aspects, the United Nations will not turn away from the necessity of simultaneously addressing the internal aspects of the conflict. UNSMA will continue to maintain close contacts with Afghan parties and personalities with a view to ensuring an immediate ceasefire, which should be followed by genuine negotiations among the warring factions for national reconciliation.

46. I note with increasing alarm that, in recent months, the repeated mutual allegations of mass killings by the Afghan factions have heightened still further ethnic and sectarian tensions in Afghanistan. These developments warrant urgent action on the part of the United Nations; credible efforts should be made immediately in order to separate fact from unsubstantiated rumour. The need to verify accusations of human rights violations is indispensable, not only because of the gravity of the acts, but also to demonstrate United Nations responsiveness and even-handedness vis-à-vis the Afghan factions.

47. I recall in this context that in paragraph 13 of resolution 52/211 B, which was adopted by consensus, the General Assembly requested me to continue to investigate fully reports about mass killings of prisoners of war and civilians and incidents of rape in Afghanistan. The Security Council, in its presidential statement of 16 December 1997 (S/PRST/1997/55), noted with deep concern the reports about mass killings of prisoners of war and civilians in Afghanistan and supported my intention to continue to investigate fully such reports.

48. With the above resolution and statement in mind, a thorough examination was made of the report provided by the forensic expert who accompanied Mr. Paik, as well as of reports from UNSMA on the subject. I am already in close consultation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights with a view to launching the investigations called for under resolution 52/211 B.

49. The objective of these investigations, to be organized and conducted by the High Commissioner, would be to establish, to the extent possible, the facts with respect to the allegations. These investigations should cover, but not be limited to, all the allegations mentioned in section IV of the present report. It should be noted at this juncture that in order to conduct the investigations it will be indispensable for the United Nations to be given the cooperation of all the Afghan parties concerned. The findings of these investigations will be reported to the General Assembly and the Security Council.

50. In the meantime, I am obliged to repeat the plea already made so many times by my predecessors and me: that those Member States concerned should heed the

wish of the ever more desperate Afghan people that they cease supplying war-making materials to the Afghan factions.

51. In conclusion, I wish to take this opportunity to express my thanks to my Special Envoy, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, for his continuing efforts and dedication to the Afghan peace process. I also wish to thank the personnel of UNSMA and its Acting Head, Mr. James C. Ngobi, for their dedication and perseverance in carrying out the tasks entrusted to them in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances.

ANNEX

Final text of talking points on Afghanistan

Since October 1997, the United Nations Secretariat has convened in New York several meetings of a group of eight countries (comprising the six neighbours of Afghanistan, plus the United States of America and the Russian Federation). The group agreed that the United Nations and the eight Member States involved should be engaged - individually and collectively - with all the Afghan parties and that, in meetings with these parties, the following points should be made by the United Nations and all the members of the "Group of Eight":

1. The Afghan war, which has gone on for so long, has caused untold human misery and material destruction. It constitutes a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the country and to the national unity of its people. It is also a serious threat to regional and international security. It must be brought to a rapid close.

2. It is a matter of concern and regret that the Afghan leaders, whose forces are doing the actual fighting, have to date shown little readiness for serious negotiations with their opponents; these parties are now strongly urged to respond to calls for peace which are made by their own people, as well as by the United Nations and the international community at large.

3. For too long, whenever one side or another in Afghanistan has felt confident of victory, it has rebuffed efforts to bring about a peaceful solution and has only shown interest in negotiations when the military situation is reversed and it, in turn, has felt under threat - by which time the other side has lost its earlier interest in dialogue.

4. The involvement of outside powers in moral and material encouragement and support of the objectives of various Afghan groups has exacerbated the tragedy of Afghanistan. It has also raised suspicions and worsened relations among outside powers. It has not led to any of the Afghan groups achieving their objectives. The Group of Eight sees no signs of a change in this situation, no matter how long fighting among Afghan groups and outside support for this continues. Moreover, this continued fighting inside Afghanistan is causing the loss of promising opportunities for regional development which could benefit Afghanistan and its neighbours.

5. Therefore, the Eight have concluded that the time has come for all States Members of the United Nations, starting with the Group of Eight, to put pressure on their respective friends in Afghanistan to recognize - once and for all - that there can never be a military solution to the Afghan conflict because no one faction (whatever the composition of its current alliance) can win an outright victory or impose an exclusive dominance over the whole country.

6. In this connection, the Eight have agreed that the United Nations and all Member States should look at ways to see how the flow of arms and other supplies to the warring parties can be checked and, for example, if and how

a mandatory arms embargo could be implemented in a fair and verifiable manner. This needs to be done in such a manner that it does not provide advantage to any one group. If this is not possible, the Eight have agreed to consider, on a voluntary and unilateral basis, refraining from actions - including the supply of assistance - which could aggravate the war in Afghanistan.

7. Afghanistan needs a representative government, acceptable to all ethnic, religious, cultural, political and social groups in Afghanistan. Such a government could take on the arduous tasks of economic reconstruction, while at the same time adhering to international norms of behaviour and honouring international conventions to which Afghanistan is a party, in particular those regarding such issues as terrorism, narcotics, unhindered access to humanitarian assistance, as well as human rights, including the human rights of women and girls.

8. While there continue to be disturbing reports of human rights abuses, including evidence of mass executions, some encouraging signs have emerged recently amid the gloom of continued fighting, notably the stated readiness of both sides to withdraw preconditions for negotiating with each other, leading to the conclusion that now would be a good time to start such negotiations under United Nations auspices, with the participation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, at a venue to be agreed upon.

9. Both sides should take some specific actions that the other side would interpret as genuine confidence-building measures and evidence of a desire to reach a settlement.

10. Relevant United Nations resolutions offer a good basis to reach agreement speedily on a ceasefire to be observed by all the warring parties; a mechanism will need to be established with the participation of all Afghan parties to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire. Reference can be made in particular to General Assembly resolution 51/195 B of 17 December 1996, operative paragraph 3 of which reads as follows:

> ["The General Assembly,]
>
> "3. Calls upon all Afghan parties to cease immediately all armed hostilities, to renounce the use of force, to put aside their differences and to engage in a political dialogue aimed at achieving national reconciliation and a lasting political settlement of the conflict and establishing a fully representative and broad-based transitional government of national unity".

11. The United Nations, as a universally recognized intermediary, must continue to play a central and impartial role in international efforts towards a peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict.

12. The United Nations Secretariat and the Group of Eight will endeavour to mobilize the international community in a major coordinated effort, beyond those activities now under way, for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Afghanistan once conditions of relative normality and stability prevail in the country.